

Crooked Sticks, Straight Lines

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[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church. And it's my joy to bring God's word to you today.

A special welcome if you are new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here. And we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community.

And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good they don't need God's grace, and no one's so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in his word.

This week we are resuming our series in the book of Judges. And you'll remember that the book of Judges is about a number of things. It's about the need for constant renewal and revival among God's people.

It's about the need for a true and faithful king, a king who can do what no human can do, which is to change the hearts of men. It's about the power of spirit-filled leadership.

[1 : 05] And it's about God's mercy to hard-hearted people, people like you and me. Last time we were in Judges chapter 13 and we began the story of Samson.

And you'll remember that we asked this question of, what is our hope when it appears that the lights have gone out? And we saw that our hope is that God does not give up on us.

Israel may have forgotten God. God has not forgotten Israel. It's with that that we continue into chapter 14. And you'll remember, if you've been with us, that there's this pattern that was set out at the very beginning of the book of Judges that we're going to go from best to worst.

And so we had Othniel, who was our greatest judge of all time, the model judge, the perfect judge. Now we come to the last judge, Samson, who is, without a doubt, the worst judge.

And so, as we come to this passage, we're simply wondering this, how is God going to work through this crazy leader? How is God going to work through the dysfunction and anger and lust and disrespect of Samson?

[2 : 16] And so with that, I invite you to turn with me to God's word. As we turn, you can go in your Bible. You can turn in your worship guide. You can turn on your phone. No matter what you do, remember that this is God's word.

Proverbs chapter 30 tells us, And so it's for that reason that we read now, Judges chapter 14, starting at verse 1.

Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw one of the daughters of the Philistines. Then he came up and told his father and mother, I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now, get her for me as my wife. But his father and mother said to him, Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives or among all our people that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?

But Samson said to his father, Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes. Verse 4. His father and mother did not know that it was from the Lord, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines.

[3 : 24] At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel. Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring.

Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done.

Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she was right in Samson's eyes. Verse 8. Verse 10.

His father went down to the woman, and Samson prepared a feast there, for so the young men used to do. As soon as the people saw him, they brought thirty companions to be with him. And Samson said to them, Let me now put a riddle to you. If you can tell me what it is, within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes.

[4 : 48] But if you cannot tell me what it is, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty changes of clothes. And they said to him, Put your riddle, that we may hear it.

Verse 14. And he said to them, Out of the eater came something to eat, out of the strong came something sweet. And in three days they could not solve the riddle.

On the fourth day they said to Samson's wife, Entice your husband to tell us what the riddle is, lest we burn you and your father's house with fire. Have you invited us here to impoverish us?

And Samson's wife wept over him and said, You only hate me, you do not love me. You have put a riddle to my people, and you have not told me what it is. And he said to her, Behold, I have not told my father nor my mother, and shall I tell you?

She wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted. And on the seventh day he told her, because she pressed him hard. Then she told the riddle to her people.

[5 : 50] And the men of the city said to him on the seventh day, before the sun went down, What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion? And he said to them, If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle.

Verse 19. And the spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon, and struck down thirty men of the town, and took their spoil, and gave the garments to those who had told the riddle.

In hot anger he went back to his father's house. And Samson's wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we do thank you again that you have given us your word to instruct us, to help us, to guide us.

And we thank you that you use imperfect, flawed, sinful people in your kingdom, people like Samson. We ask that you would use this chapter this morning to show us our great need for your grace and your mercy.

[6 : 58] You'd comfort us with that very same grace and mercy that you would lead us to know and love our Lord Jesus more and more. It's in his name that we ask all of these things.

Amen. If we had just Judges chapter 13 to go on, if that's all we knew about the story of Samson, we would be only excited at this point.

We talked last week about how God has this great mercy for his people despite the fact that they have forgotten him. They don't even cry out to him for help and yet God still shows up to rescue. He's raising up this redeemer, this man who's going to save Israel from the Philistines. And he has even a more complicated birth story and calling story than any other judge that we've seen.

Even more than that, you may remember as we left chapter 13, we were told this very last verse, the spirit of the Lord began to stir him, that is Samson.

[7 : 57] And so just knowing that, we would think, wow, God is going to do the pattern that he's done before. Samson has been raised up. What should we expect but that he's going to go out and have a great victory?

Chapter 14, we should see Samson. He's going to go. He's going to trash the Philistines. Everyone's going to rejoice. Things are going to continue very well in the nation of Israel. And so it should be, in a sense, a surprise to us as we begin chapter 14 because it is a disappointing montage of failure.

Samson does stupid thing after stupid thing. Verses 2 and 3, Samson is disrespectful of his parents. He orders them around. He says, look, this woman is right in my eyes.

And he says twice, get her for me. His parents try to dissuade him, try to ask him, hey, isn't there someone among our own people, someone who loves God that you could go with?

And Samson doesn't even listen to them. He just tells them, this is what I want. This is what you're going to do. And so he has this disregard for his parents' concern and advice. Even more than that, Samson has no regard for God's law.

[9 : 11] If you were with us back in 2019 when we were in the book of Nehemiah, as we got to the very end, remember one of Nehemiah's reforms was to break up these interfaith marriages where God's people had married with pagans who were pulling them away from worship of the one true God.

And so Samson's parents, rightly or wrongly, like many parents, decide to pick their battles and they head down with Samson for this unfortunate marriage. And let's not miss what Samson is doing here.

It's not simply or merely that Samson is marrying someone who does not love the one true God. Samson is marrying into the Philistines. He should instead be fighting the Philistines.

He's doing the very opposite of what God has called him to do. He is making friends with God's enemies. If that were not enough, Samson then goes on to violate himself and his parents.

In verses 6-9, we see that this lion comes. The Spirit of the Lord comes upon Samson. He's able to rip this lion apart. So far, so good. He comes back to the lion, though, and he finds this beehive is there.

[10 : 27] He finds there's actually honey he can get. Now, remember I told you last week the fact that Samson is a Nazarite is going to become very important this week. Nazarites are set apart to God with a special focus and devotion to him, and there's three things they're not supposed to do.

They're not supposed to touch dead bodies. They're not supposed to cut their hair. They're not supposed to touch alcohol. Where is the honey? It's inside a dead body.

And it's not really just Nazarites who aren't supposed to touch dead bodies. It's all of God's people are made ceremonially unclean by this. To make things worse, it's not just that Samson touches this honey.

He takes it and brings it to his parents, and verse 9 tells us how bad it is. He did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the carcass of a lion.

This would be similar to you today going to the bathroom, not washing your hands at all, and then coming back to prepare food for everyone.

[11 : 36] Okay, we are being told this. Samson is nasty. Okay? Samson is gross. He touches dead bodies.

He then gives dead body honey to other people, doesn't tell them what it is they're touching and they're eating. Remember, he's a Nazarite. No dead bodies, no cutting hair, no alcohol.

What does he do next? Well, he goes and he throws this party. Verses 10. Verse 10 and 11.

Samson prepared a feast there for so the young men used to do. What do the young men do when they throw a party?

They're not drinking ginger ale. Okay? Samson continues to disregard God's call on his life. In fact, he sums it up in both verse 3 and verse 7 when we're told about his feelings toward this woman, we're given this phrase, she was right in his eyes.

Now, for a long time, I used to think that this statement was about Samson's physical attraction to this woman and at some level that's probably true, but this phrase, right in their eyes, is going to show up later in the book of Judges, not about romantic relationships, but about people doing whatever they want.

[12 : 59] In other words, Samson likes her, and nothing else matters. Samson is interested in this woman. He could not care less what his parents think, what God thinks.

Samson does what Samson wants. For whatever reason, this woman melts Samson's butter. Okay? Nothing else matters.

And so we're seeing a theme here. We have not seen it once, twice, but three times. Samson does almost everything wrong. Samson is supposed to be set apart to God as a Nazarite.

He's supposed to be called to this higher level of obedience and focus. He can't even get the basics right. Not marrying a Philistine, that's not some special rule for Nazarites.

No, no Israelite is supposed to do that. Yes, Nazarites are not supposed to touch dead bodies. No Israelite is supposed to touch a dead body.

[14 : 06] Samson should be taking senior level classes. Samson can't even make it through Israelite 101. Samson is the worst judge.

So the author of Judges is telling us over and over to make sure we don't miss it. Look, Samson is a trash fire. Samson's life is a complete train wreck.

This is the man who God is going to use to save his people from the Philistines. A man who disregards his parents.

A man who disregards God himself. So what do we do? with this terrible no-good judge.

Now the key to chapter 14 is in verse 4. Samson's parents are beside themselves that Samson's making these choices that he's marrying the wrong person.

[15:13] But what they don't know is what we're told here. It was from the Lord. for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines.

In other words, Samson is a mess. God is still at work. In the midst of Samson's flaws and failure, God is still bringing deliverance.

God is working out his purposes no matter what. In fact, this is a theme we've seen in other parts of Scripture.

You may remember at the very end of the book of Genesis in the Joseph story, Joseph is sold by his brothers because of their jealousy, cast him into a pit, then they sell him into slavery.

God uses their jealousy to save his people from famine. And you'll remember, Joseph gives this memorable line at the very end of the book.

[16:21] He tells his brothers, as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today.

The point is this. God is gracious, and in his graciousness, he works through sinful, flawed, foolish, arrogant, imperfect people.

God uses foolish, selfish, sinful men and women to accomplish his will. God will accomplish his purposes.

God will accomplish his purposes. The will of the Lord will prevail.

God uses parents who are still wrestling with their own demons to teach their children and their grandchildren about God's love.

[17:34] God uses narcissists with strong personalities to get organizations off the ground. God uses self-centered friends who often lose the plot to care for us, to comfort us, to serve us.

God uses leaders with overwhelming pride and ego to take courageous stands for unpopular truths.

God uses people who are anxious and fearful to speak words of comfort and healing to his people.

God uses the persecution of the church to scatter his people and spread the gospel.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. I am not saying sin does not matter. And I am not saying that our sin does not have consequences.

Gideon's sin is going to catch up with him in a big way. In two chapters, chapter 16, the rant is going to come to.

[18:56] Samson is going to have to pay the price for his foolishness. So I'm not saying sin doesn't matter. I'm not saying we brush away those things. What I am saying is this.

God is gracious. God in his grace chooses to work through imperfect people. In fact, that's the only kind of people there are.

God in his grace accomplishes his work through Samson. God in his grace accomplishes his work through you and me.

You'll see this on page seven of your worship guide, a quote from Martin Luther. God uses crooked sticks to draw straight lines. Christian, you are, I am, we are crooked sticks.

And God's line will always be straight. God uses you and me and us in the midst of our stupidity, our mistakes, our failure, our sin.

[20:18] none of them stop the advance of his kingdom. They don't stop Samson from being used by God.

They don't stop us either. God will be God to be God. God is using us when God uses us, it does not mean that he approves of everything in our lives.

It does not mean that we have it all figured out. it does not mean when we see great fruit and success in our efforts that we pat ourselves on the back.

It does mean that God is a God of mercy. It does mean that God is a God who keeps his promises.

It does mean that God is a God who is faithful.

So there's a sobering truth. It gives us great humility as we follow Jesus together. There's also an encouraging truth. God can and God will use us for his glory despite our sin and rebellion and confusion.

[21 : 48] Not because we are great, but because God is great. God will always accomplish his purposes. I told you a minute ago that verse 4 was our key to this chapter.

And verse 4 tells us it was from the Lord. What is it that's from the Lord? Also tells us he's seeking an opportunity against the Philistines.

Remember, when the angel of the Lord comes to Manoah's wife, the angel says, look, Samson is going to begin to save Israel. And what is it that happens in this chapter?

Samson begins to save Israel. And he begins to save Israel by taking some Philistines to task. In verses 12-8, he sets out this impossible riddle.

This riddle that makes sense to him because he's experienced it, right? He knows about the lion. Not a riddle that makes sense to anyone else. So Samson, he's not fair to the Philistines.

[22 : 56] The Philistines decide all is fair in love and war. They're not fair to Samson. And so we see in verse 15, they go and threaten his wife. Clearly his wife is not aware of Samson's powers.

If she were, she would have just filled him in. Hey, there's some Philistines they've threatened to burn down my parents' house. Can you go rip them apart? Instead, she spends days crying, right? Not knowing how it is that she can convince Samson.

And finally, verses 17 and 18, he tells her. She tells them, and there's some foreshadowing here, wait for chapter 16, the same play is going to get run on Samson again.

Samson has a weakness, that weakness is women. And what does God do? He accomplishes his purposes.

Verse 19, And the spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon, and struck down thirty men of the town, and took their spoil, and gave the garments to those who had told the riddle.

[24 : 00] In hot anger, he went back to his father's house. Samson wrecks some Philistines. God creates tension between his people and the Philistines when his people are complacent under oppression.

God accomplishes his purposes. God uses Samson to reach end state. Samson's sin and lust and selfishness are not great enough to stand in God's way.

Christian, your lust and sin and selfishness are not great enough to stand in God's way. That is how great our God is.

It's not just that God uses sinful men and women, though. We also see here God beats the devil at his own game. Satan loves to promote sin.

Satan is thrilled that Samson has all of these character flaws. Satan is delighted that Samson has an anger problem.

[25 : 18] He loves that Samson is weak around women. God says whatever evil you promote, I will use it for my purposes.

I will turn evil to good. Remember again, Genesis 50, as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.

You'll see this on page nine of your worship guide. William Gurnall tells us, God lays as it were his own plans under Satan's wings and makes him hatch them.

The Philistines are going to be defeated no matter what. Some of you may be familiar with the card game Uno. In that game, you know you can move either clockwise or counterclockwise, and it's become a popular meme in recent years, the power of the reverse Uno card.

Someone's coming up against you with an attack. All you need to do is have the most special card in the entire deck, the reverse card, and you throw it down, and suddenly the direction of play changes.

[26 : 31] So if moves were moving clockwise, you throw down your reverse Uno card, things go counterclockwise. Going counterclockwise, you throw your reverse card down, they go clockwise. It's become this meme of reversing the direction, using someone's momentum against them.

There's a picture you can find on the internet of a referee calling out a soccer player with his card, and the soccer player has the reverse Uno card in his hand. And so he's saying, no, ref, the call is on you, not me.

God constantly plays reverse Uno on the devil. God uses Satan's momentum against him. God takes the evil and sin in this world, and he takes the evil and the sin of his people.

He uses it to accomplish his will. No matter how tricky and strategic and tactical Satan is, he always ends up flat on his face.

It's ironic as we move through the book of Judges, as things get worse in Israel, the encouragement actually increases.

[27 : 51] You may remember as we were in the early Judges, we would talk about, hey, this is the sin that Israel is falling into. We want to avoid that sin and move towards righteousness, right? This chapter we've kind of given up on that.

There's too many sins going on here for Samson. He's doing everything wrong. And so more and more, the sounding note is this, as bad as things get for God's people, God's mercy is greater. As much as God's people mess it up, God's power is more. No matter how much you believe that you have messed it up, God is still in control.

Even if you think the future is gone, God is still writing it. God's grace is more and more.

The more Israel fails, the more gracious God is. It is one thing in the beginning and middle of Judges to see God's grace to sinful people.

[28 : 59] It is another thing to see God's grace to really sinful people. God's grace in the life of Samson is shocking.

Christian, God's grace in your life is shocking as well. And it's shocking because of his mercy and his love and his forgiveness.

forgiveness. It's pretty clear what I hinted at last week, which is that Samson is not going to cut it. Israel ultimately is going to need a better and greater king.

We've already seen some of Samson's failures. Things are going to get worse next week and even worse the week after. Samson is going to, at the end, because of God's mercy, pull a success from the jaws of defeat.

Which brings us back to the beginning, the middle of this chapter. You may have found it strange that a beehive shows up in a lion's carcass.

[30 : 11] At least I hope you found it strange. When I go to Costco, there is no lion's carcass honey. Right? Because those things don't happen.

Honey does not come out of dead corpses. One commentator puts it this way, Bees do not normally inhabit cadavers, flies and maggots do.

God is bringing something sweet and gracious out of the corpse of his people. God is taking what should be rotting and decaying and turning it into something life-giving.

God shows up to his people who have forgotten and abandoned him and he brings them deliverance. Which points us forward to an even greater and sweeter deliverance.

God comes to his people who rebel against him and he sends his one and only son to bring something sweet.

[31 : 28] God shows up to a world that hates him and he sacrifices his one and only son so that he can love them. Samson begins to save Israel from the Philistines.

God saves his people once and for all. And so as we reach past the halfway point in Judges, we see God's grace dripping more and more.

We see God's grace growing larger and larger because sweetness comes from death, not only in this lion, but in our Lord Jesus.

That Jesus comes and he lives the perfect life that we should have lived. He dies the death that we deserve to die. He brings life where there should be death.

As one man has put it, he uses an instrument of torture as an instrument of salvation. He takes people who hate him. He sends his son to love them.

[32 : 45] Christian, that's the good news for this world. That's the good news for you. God uses imperfect, sinful, failing, stupid people to accomplish his purposes.

Those are the only people there are. Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that is greater than all our sin.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you that your grace is so great it is shocking. We thank you for your grace in Samson's life, your faithfulness to your people.

We thank you for your faithfulness to us in our lives. We ask that you would remind us of it, that we would know that the future isn't gone because you're still writing it for us.

That would lead us to greater hope and confidence and trust and faith in you. And we ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.